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DOMESTIC HANDICRAFT AND CULTURE: A LECTURE READ BEFORE THE ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF DOMESTIC SCIENCE, MAY 28TH, 1910. BY ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY, D.Sc.

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DOMESTIC HANDICRAFT AND CULTURE

LET me begin with definitions. Once upon a time all handicrafts were domestic. It would not be far wrong to say that none now are so. But for the purpose of these notes I shall consider as domestic handicrafts those which have been, historically speaking, most generally practised in the home: it will be convenient to take spinning and weaving as the typical case, to stand for all the home industries which have been swept away by modern industrialism. I shall expressly exclude from consideration any mere accomplishments such as modern education

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commonly substitutes, especially in the case of women, for real and practical knowledge. The dabbler in fretwork, enamelling, or book-binding, who merely earns pin-money and undersells the trade, I shall also ignore. But the serious practice of a craft such as jewellery or book-binding under small workshop conditions stands nearly in the same relation to culture as the practice of an actually domestic craft, and should be considered, especially when the small workshop is in or near the home, so that the work going on becomes part of the everyday experience of the family.

To define culture is perhaps a harder thing. Plato identified it with the

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capacity for immediate and instinctive discrimination between good and bad workmanship, of whatever sort; it is perhaps in this respect that the present age is least of all cultivated. We may expand this definition by including a certain quality of recollectedness or detachment, a capacity for stillness of mind and body (restlessness is essentially uncultured), and the power of penetrating mere externals in individual men or various races. Culture includes a view of life essentially balanced, where real and false values are not confused; also, I think, a certain knowledge of or interest in things which are not directly utilitarian, that is to say, which do not

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merely give pleasure to the senses or confirm a prejudice. If these things, or some of them, be culture, how does the practice of a domestic craft such as weaving (which we have chosen as the type) stand in relation to them?

If you walked through the streets of an Eastern town, or if in imagination you walked through the streets of London as they must have been a few centuries ago, you would find life and handicraft very much more intimately associated than is now the case. You would see weaving, shoemaking, metal-work, carpentry and many other crafts all going forward as part of the common life. And when such conditions as these

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obtained, everybody possessed a more general knowledge of the ways in which things were done, and they actually did very much more for themselves. Together with this, went a more real knowledge of the qualities of materials, and the instinctive demand that they should be useful as well as attractive superficially. Under such conditions it was not as easy as it now is to pass off inferior wool, bad jam, and flimsy furniture upon the thrifty housewife, for she knew how to spin the wool, to make the jam, and her brother or a neighbour was the carpenter. Whatever may or may not have been gained by transferring the centre of production from the home to the

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factory, it is very clear that certain things have been lost. It is perhaps mainly a result of this non-acquaintance with the conditions of production that is accountable for the small respect in which workmanship is now held, and above all for the persistent demand for cheap pretentious goods on the part of those who formerly possessed solid and durable things. Under domestic conditions, whatever is made is made to fulfil its purpose. Under industrial conditions, nearly everything that is made is made primarily for sale at a profit, and it is almost a matter of indifference if the ostensible purpose of the goods be effectively attained.

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There are scarcely any objects associated with our daily home life, which are not better made, in respect of quality, by hand than by machine. As I look around my study, I see nothing for which I have to thank mechanical production under factory conditions. I know well that no machine, not one of a thousand factories, can make for me a rug as fine as the unlettered wandering tribes of Central Asia can still weave in their own tents. No steam saw or mechanism for machine carving can design my settle, or make my chair or table as I would have it. No photographs of the works of the great masters compensate me for the absence of a living art that could have built a

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modern house as beautiful in mass and detail as is the old one I am fortunate enough to live in. And of books, the best are centuries old, or are the product of modern hand-presses under small workshop conditions. Machinery, in fact, has not enriched our home life. Even if it has brought to us the treasures of the ends of the earth, we have a heavy price to pay for these, nothing less than the destruction of such art at its very sources. The effect of substituting mechanical for domestic and small workshop production has really been this, that certain fine things which used to be obtainable in every market-place in the world are now only to be seen in museums.

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Because they are to be seen in museums, we imagine that we are cultured. But by their fruits ye shall know them. We know by their work that men of old were cultivated. What will future generations, judging by our works, think of us? For, as Watts once said, "scarcely a single object amongst those that surround us, has any pretension to real beauty, or could be put simply into a picture with noble effect." How does this affect our culture? Let us return to Plato. There is in all these things, such as weaving, he says, propriety and impropriety; and we must restrain the "ill, undisciplined, illiberal, indecent" manner, "lest our guardians,

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being educated in the midst of ill-representations, as in an ill pasture, whereby everyday plucking and eating a deal of different things, by little and little they contract imperceptibly some mighty evil in their souls."

When we consider the restlessness which characterises modern life, we need go no further to enquire what that evil may be. To be satisfied with imitations—to be able to endure a gramophone after once hearing a living singer—to walk upon a carpet covered with bunches of roses tied in ribbons—to call "art paper" a paste of china clay used for reproducing photographic illustrations in cheap books—for women in their

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dress to deform their internal organs and their feet—for men to use by preference dingy tubular garments best adapted not to show the dirt of the atmosphere they are content to breathe—to place imitative dexterity in art above the power of great invention or nobility of motif—to assume superiority of soul on the mere ground of increased empirical knowledge—to accept always the report of the senses against the report of intuition—to seek always for novelty—these things are the opposite of culture, and some of them are caused by, or made possible by the destruction of the domestic crafts. Perhaps it would be truer to say that both things, our loss of culture and

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the destruction of handicraft, result from some inner malady which we do not comprehend; but even if this be so, we cannot fail to recognise the close connection between the actual phenomena. Restlessness is born of idleness. Thought is stimulated by rhythmic (but not unintelligent) labour. When the senses are, as it were, told off to carry on their own work, then the mind awakens to ideas. I do not think that women are wiser because they have abandoned the spinning wheel and the loom for the office and the factory. I think they have lost reflectiveness. One does not forget that the childhood of Christ was spent in a carpenter's shop, nor that two at least of India's

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greatest poets and religious teachers—Kabīr and Tiruvalluvar—were weavers. I cannot think of any instance where the destruction of a handicraft has promoted culture. We should consider whether men or things are the greatest possession of a nation. There are so many ways in which mechanism applied to an unsuitable purpose defeats its own ends. The subject of my address is Handicraft and Culture with special reference to the home. The home we may take in its broadest sense to mean all that part of our environment which is personal and intimate, as distinguished from that which is merely temporary and utilitarian. In these personal things mechanism

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over-reaches itself. It attains too great an uniformity in methods and materials. Dyes, stained glass, enamels, all these become too uniform. Machine planed wood, a steam-impressed book-binding have no vitality of surface. No one can make a violin as well as they were made two centuries ago in little workshops. From the standpoint of culture, is there any compensation for this to be found in our increased material comfort, or in mere variety and novelty?

The actual making of machinery itself is almost the only living craft—where excellence in the craft itself is a first consideration. It is not machinery that we need to abandon

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in our search for culture. We could ill spare the culture of the electrician, the engineer and the builder of bridges. All that we need is to use, not to misuse the power these men can give us. Let me illustrate by an example the relation of machinery to handicraft and culture. Take such a trade as carpet-making under modern conditions, by power looms. The operator has no longer to design, or to weave in and out the threads with his own fingers. He is employed in reality, not as a carpet weaver—such men no longer exist—but as the tender of a machine. He may, it is true, rise to a higher place, but it is only the place of a man responsible for the successful running of many

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machines by many men. He can never rise by virtue of his knowledge or experience in the craft itself, because, as I have said, the craft no longer exists. The craftsman himself can always, if allowed to, draw the delicate distinction between the machine and the tool. The carpet loom is a tool, a contrivance for holding warp threads at a stretch, for the pile to be woven round them by the craftsmen's fingers; but the power loom is a machine, and its significance as a destroyer of culture lies in the fact that it does the essentially human part of the work and imposes limitations on the spontaneity and freedom of the design and the imagination of the worker.

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These limitations re-act upon the user in the form of lifelessness, lack of temperament or response, in his daily environment.

I should like you to consider carefully the effect upon us of the nature of our daily environment. We all of us believe more or less in what we call association; we are sensitive to the personal impress surviving in the relics of great men, the books they possessed or the letters they wrote; and we should agree that no reproduction, however theoretically perfect, could ever have a value equal to that of the authentic work of a master's own hand. A beautiful description of an Indian lute, in the Arabian Nights, tells us that when

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its strings were touched, it sang of the waters that gave it drink, and the earth whence it sprang, of the carpenters who cut it and the polishers who polished it and the merchants who made it their merchandise, and the ships that shipped it. And which of us, who seek to surround ourselves with the work of human hands and hearts, is deaf to what the nomad carpet tells us of life in Central Asian tents, to what the moulded stone and adze-cut beam inform us of the mediæval builder, or the Saxon jewel of its wearer? Are we not also sensitive to the inventive force and loving care expressed in the work of modern craftsmen, in a volume from the Kelmscott press or a painted chest

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from Daneway House? And if we lacked this sensitiveness, should we not lack just so much culture? But you cannot eat your cake and have it. Everything was once made in that personal individual way. We cannot keep that sensitiveness in a purely mechanical environment.

One of those men who are best described as born travellers, lately remarked that the Burman "if asked to give his candid opinion after a year's experience of English life, would probably say that the position of the vast majority of Englishmen was not much better than that of chained slaves." And would the Burman be far wrong? I think not. For if it were a legal punishment for

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serious crime that a man should spend ten hours out of every twenty-four in a hole in the ground clipping tiny pieces out of small cards, or that a man should spend his days adding figures at a desk, I am sure that some of us of the Humanitarian League would have much to say of the barbaric cruelty of our prison system. It is only, I think, because men are now so accustomed to the idea of doing unintelligent work, that they can be got to perform such tasks as these.

There has lately been a great revival of appreciation of folk-music. How much of this music do you think is the product of factory conditions, and how much belongs to hand work

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and to the open air? What is the use of patronising an art like this, if the very structure of our society is for ever destroying the possibility of its continued growth?

The forces destroying culture move in a vicious circle. No individual ever made a gramophone because he loved music; but the gramophones made in factories are daily destroying the capacity for appreciating real music in the villages. I know of one Cotswold village where the local shopkeeper has no less than twenty gramophones hired out in the local public houses, where men used once to sing themselves.

I have already alluded to one other phase of the relation between in-

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dustrialism and culture. I mean the destruction of culture in other, particularly Asiatic countries, as the result of mechanical over-production in Europe. As William Morris wrote: "the Indian or Javanese craftsman may no longer ply his craft leisurely, working a few hours a day, in producing a maze of strange beauty on a piece of cloth; a steam-engine is set a-going at Manchester, and that victory over Nature and a thousand stubborn difficulties is used for the base work of producing a sort of plaster of china clay and shoddy, and the Asiatic worker, if he is not starved to death outright, as plentifully happens, is driven himself into a factory to lower the wages

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of his Manchester brother, and nothing of character is left him except, most like, an accumulation of fear and hatred of that to him unnaccountable evil, his English master." Perhaps the extraordinary meanness of the English or Dutch manufacturer who sponges on Indian or Javanese design, and reproduces mechanical and very inferior imitations of it very cheaply for the European or for the local Asiatic market has not struck you ! The process is often described as "successfully contesting the village weaver's market." I shall not be so foolish as to suggest the governing of European manufacture by ethical considerations, for there is better work to do at present

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than such a ploughing of the sand. I do, however, wish to point out that the solidarity of humanity, especially under modern conditions of easy transport, is too real to permit of such causes failing to re-act for the worse upon European culture. In conclusion, therefore, I suggest to you that the substitution of mechanical production under factory conditions, for hand production under domestic or small workshop conditions, of such things as form the daily environment of our ordinary lives, is directly destructive of culture. For such things (mark the words such things—I do not mean everything) are better made under these conditions: their making is in

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itself educational—kindergartens are only necessary because these crafts have been subtracted from life; they make for rhythm and stability in our environment. Their preservation or restoration is theoretically justifiable, because under such conditions the necessity for earning a livelihood and the force of the creative instinct are the dominating factors, whereas, under wholesale industrial conditions, every other consideration is sacrificed to profit-making. Particularly I suggest that everywhere and always the competition between a man and a machine is destructive of culture. A civilisation which cannot effect between them a reasonable division of labour, does not

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deserve the name. The place of machinery in a true civilisation should be that of a servant, and not a master. It should carry out the simplest and most mechanical processes of manufacture, it should save the craftsman from the heaviest and least interesting part of his work; but it should not rob him of that part of his labour which is his very craft. For if it does so rob him, not only is his own intelligence correspondingly destroyed, but the community has to accept an environment æsthetically and spiritually inferior, an environment that certainly does not express or produce what we understand by culture.

The problem is not how to abolish

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machinery, but how so to regulate it that it shall serve without enslaving man; how to stop competition between machine and hand work by defining and delimiting intelligently the proper sphere of each. The community cannot afford to dispense with the intellectual and imaginative forces, the educational and ethical factors in life which go with the existence of skilled craftsmen and small workshops. These must therefore—if we value culture—be protected in their proper sphere. The means to this end are the endowment of craftsmanship, and the transference of the control of production from the hands of those who exploit, again into the hands of those

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who themselves create. Without this we must, as a race, be condemned to "polish brass and iron hour after hour, laborious work, kept ignorant of their use" : to "spend the days of wisdom in sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread, in ignorance to view a small portion and think that All, and call it demonstration, blind to the simple rules of life."

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